

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Measles Alert

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MEASLES ALERT

Measles is one of the most contagious of all infectious diseases. Given widespread outbreaks in the United States and internationally, the chance of exposure to measles is increased at this time. Cases of measles have been recently seen in New York State and Connecticut, and one case was identified in Boston at the end of March. There are no known cases of measles in Northampton or Western Massachusetts at this time, but the Northampton Public Health Department will continue to monitor for measles cases.

The Northampton Public Health Department and Board of Public Health urge residents who have not been fully immunized against measles with two doses of the measles immunization, or who are unsure of their status, to contact their healthcare provider to get fully immunized in order to better protect their individual health and to prevent the spread of measles to others. MMR vaccine may also be available at local pharmacies.

There are members of our community who, unfortunately, cannot get immunized against measles—most commonly the very young and those with severely compromised immune systems. Those individuals, as well as pregnant women, are at significant risk of developing serious illness if they are exposed to measles.

On average, one or two of every 1,000 patients who develop measles dies of a respiratory or neurologic complication. Infected people can infect those around them before they have symptoms and know they are infected. The measles virus can be transmitted from one person to another up to 4 days before the onset of rash. It is so contagious that about 90% of people who have never been immunized against measles become ill 7-21 days after exposure. A major concern for our community is that people who develop measles can easily and unknowingly transmit disease to others, some of whom may develop serious illness.

Common symptoms of measles include fever, cough, runny nose, conjunctivitis (red eyes) and then, a few days later, a rash which usually appears 10 to 21 days after the exposure. Individuals with measles symptoms should contact their healthcare provider or emergency department/urgent care provider by phone before going, so measures can be taken to prevent possible spread to others in the provider's waiting room. They should also tell their healthcare provider if they know they are not fully vaccinated for measles, have traveled internationally or had international visitors in the last 21 days or had exposure to another person with measles.

The virus is transmitted by direct contact with infectious droplets or by airborne spread when an infected person breathes, coughs, or sneezes. Measles virus can remain infectious in the air for up to two hours after an infected person leaves an area. People are considered infectious 4 days before and for 4 days after the appearance of the rash.

It is important if you or someone you know has the symptoms of measles or has been exposed to measles to contact your healthcare provider by phone right away. The best way to protect yourself and to prevent the spread of measles is to get the measles immunization, with two doses of measles immunization being about 97% effective at preventing measles.

If and when Public Health identifies contacts of a person confirmed to have measles during an investigation and a contact does not have proof of immunity or vaccination, that person will be subject to quarantine (mandatory confinement to their home) for up to 21 days from the date of exposure. The local board of public health, in conjunction with other local authorities, is responsible for enforcing an Order for Quarantine. A blood test may be done to check for immunity.

The Department of Public Health recommends the following:

- All children should receive two doses of measles immunization. The first should be administered between the ages of 12 to 15 months, and the second between the ages of 4 and 6 years. The immunization can be given as early as ages 6-11 months if there is concern about direct exposure to measles or if travel to places with current measles outbreaks is anticipated.
- All other persons should locate written verification they have received 2 doses of measles immunization in their life or have proof of immunity (blood test). The second dose recommendation was not made until 1989, so many adults born between 1957 and 1989 may have received only 1 dose. This is considered inadequate, and a second dose is required for optimal immunity. People born in 1957 or before are considered immune, since measles was widespread at that time.
- Those who are unable to locate written verification of 2 doses of measles vaccine or do not have proof of immunity should discuss this with their healthcare provider. A Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) booster may be offered.

Is MMR vaccine safe? Yes. It is very safe for most people. However, a vaccine, like other medicines, can cause side effects in some people. The MMR vaccine can cause fever, mild rash, temporary pain or stiffness of the joints. More severe problems are such as febrile seizures or low platelets are extremely rare. MMR is NOT associated with autism, as some people mistakenly believe. Getting MMR vaccine is much safer than getting measles, and most people do extremely well after receiving the vaccine. MMR vaccine may be given without checking immunity status. There is no “measles-only” vaccine.

Who should not get MMR vaccine?

- People who have serious allergies to gelatin, the drug neomycin or a previous dose of the vaccine.
- Pregnant women or women who are trying to get pregnant within 4 weeks should not get MMR vaccine until after they deliver their babies.
- People with cancer, advanced HIV or other problems, or treatments that weaken the immune system should check with their provider before getting vaccinated.
- People who have recently had a transfusion or were given other blood products should check with their provider before getting vaccinated.
- People with high fevers should not be vaccinated until after the fever and other symptoms are gone.

More About Measles

<https://www.mass.gov/service-details/measles>

<https://www.cdc.gov/measles/index.html>

